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# Debate-Book Crisis May Force President to Abandon Passivity

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A long, long time ago, in a political galaxy called California, a novice governor named Ronald Reagan found himself forced to deal with sensational accusations that several of his aides were involved in a "homosexual ring."

The charges, which provoked more of a public stir in 1967 than they would today, came close to shattering the young Reagan administration. Aides repeated ugly rumors about other aides. Reagan strategists worried that the "scandal" would ruin his chances in next year's presidential campaign.

Oblivious to the fact that a full-scale internal investigation of the suspects had been launched by other aides without his knowledge or consent, Reagan angrily blamed the press and political opponents for instigating the story.

Although the charges were never proven, the suspect aides were forced to leave. The action was forced by their accusers, who gathered circumstantial evidence, prepared a long report for Reagan and confronted him with it. The governor, trembling in disbelief, accepted the report, and the accused aides were allowed to resign behind the cover of a concocted story.

On the face of it, one would think that such an incident would cause an administrator to become more involved in personnel management.

But it had the opposite effect on Reagan. He told close friends at the time that he was disillusioned by government, and he reacted by going into seclusion and turning over the governor's office to a collective leadership. The lesson he drew was to become more distant from decision-making.

The current investigation may not be as traumatic for Reagan as the so-called homosexual scandal, but reporters who covered him in those days have a sense of *deja vu* about his current attitude.

As the search widens for those responsible for obtaining Carter White House materials for the Reagan campaign, aides once more accuse each other, and strategists worry about fallout in the next election. Once again, Reagan is disbelieving and inclined to blame those who report the story rather than those who created it.

Although the response is reminiscent, the analogy is imperfect. The earlier scandal involved basically a power struggle and not a possible crime. It is not yet clear whether the present inquiry will result in firings or resignations, or what public judgment will be.

It is clear that Reagan invariably follows a pattern when high aides or appointees become suspect. Whether the matter is an accusation of scandal or incompetence or a battle among his campaign high command, Reagan's basic tendency has always been to doubt the charges, categorically defend his aides and remain securely removed from the battle.

"It is all wrapped up with his basic optimism and his belief that he is doing the right thing," a longtime intimate said. "By extension, he applies this to everyone who is working for him."

Within the White House, this downward loyalty is seen as the reason for Reagan's wavering performance at his news conference last week and his anger afterward at the press for "pushing the story."

Administration officials regarded as naive a suggestion that Reagan could speed things along by calling top aides on the carpet and especially by trying to refresh the recollection of his former campaign manager, William J. Casey, his forgetful CIA director.

"You've got to be kidding," one official said. "Ronald Reagan doesn't operate that way."

Based on the record, this is an accurate assessment. And it has raised anew the question about Reagan's disengagement from his presidency, a detachment bordering on passivity on policy questions and personnel issues.

In the past, Reagan has made a virtue of being aloof from events that would be central to the lives of other candidates and presidents. He has been billed, by himself and his staff, as a leader who soars above detail to decide fundamental policy.

As a practical matter, this disengagement gives Reagan a presumption of credibility when his aides are suspect. But even some of the Reagan faithful now say privately that the president may have reached the limits of disengagement.

This time the aides are beginning to realize that even Reagan cannot always leave the unpleasant decisions to others. This time he may have to become involved in his presidency and show the leadership expected of him.